

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

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THE STUDY AREA

This document is a land use plan for state and certain borough lands in the southcentral portion of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The plan addresses these public lands in an area of about one million acres known as the Willow Sub-basin, a hydrologic sub-basin of the Susitna River Basin (Map 1). The northern border of the sub-basin is the Kashwitna River drainage, the western border the Susitna River, the southern border Cook Inlet, and the eastern border the drainage divide between the Matanuska and Susitna Rivers.

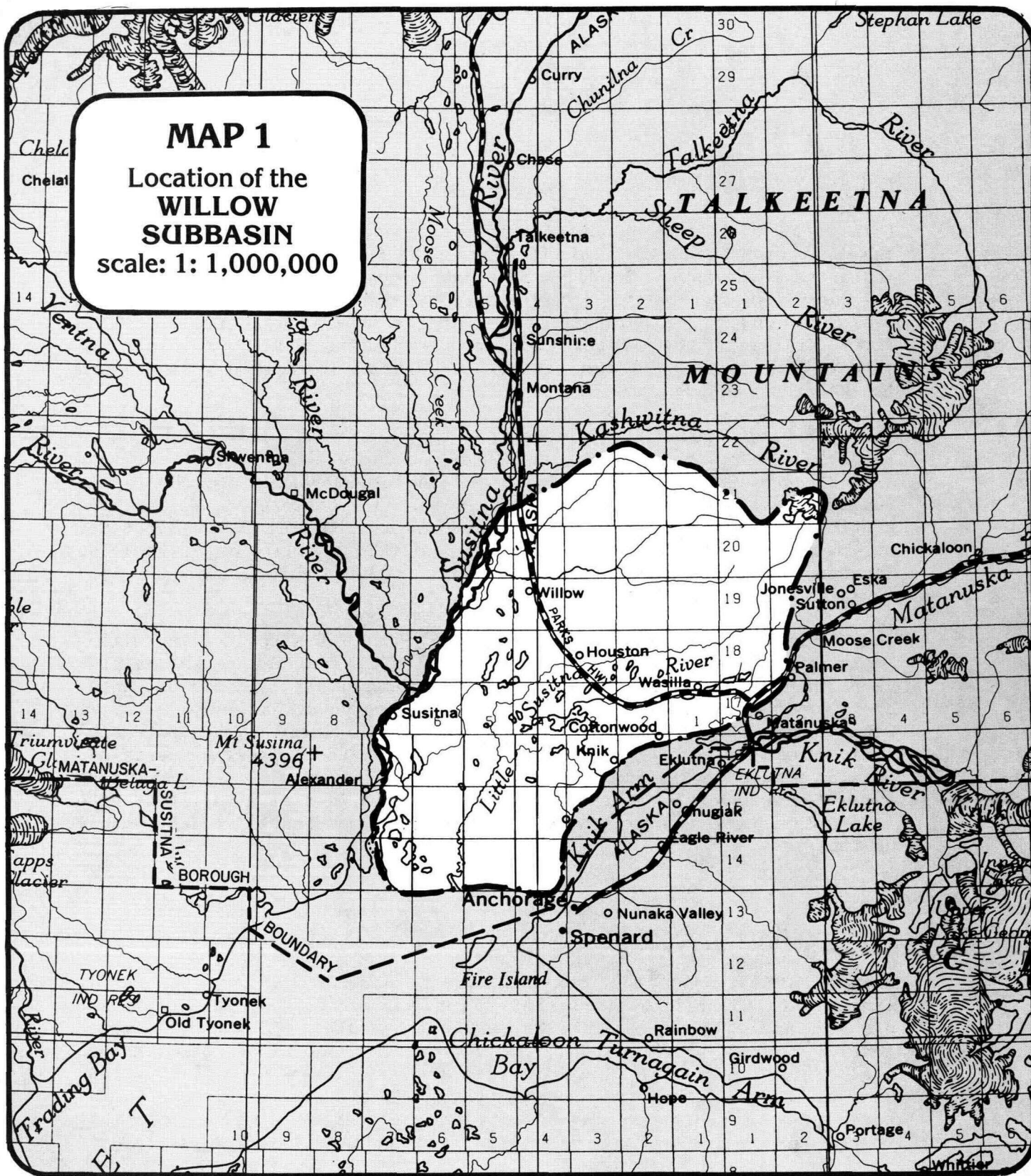
The sub-basin generally slopes to the southwest from the rugged Talkeetna Mountains to low, undulating country, with many lakes and muskeg among wooded hills. Drainages in the sub-basin are the Little Susitna River and Goose, Fish, Lucille, Wasilla, Cottonwood, Willow, and Little Willow Creeks. Familiar landmarks are Hatcher Pass, Big Lake, Pt. MacKenzie, the Susitna Game Flats, and the communities of Wasilla, Houston, and Willow on the George Parks Highway. The sub-basin also contains the proposed capital site.

The State of Alaska owns approximately 65% (619,740 acres) of the Willow Sub-basin, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough 14% (135,830 acres), and private landowners 20% (193,730 acres). Of the private land, 13,300 acres are owned by native regional and village corporations. (See Map 2, Generalized Land Ownership.) The public lands include high potential agricultural and timber lands, mining areas in the Talkeetna Mountains, and important recreation resources, including several anadromous fish streams and some of the state's best hunting. This plan is intended to insure that these public resources provide maximum benefit to the people of the state.

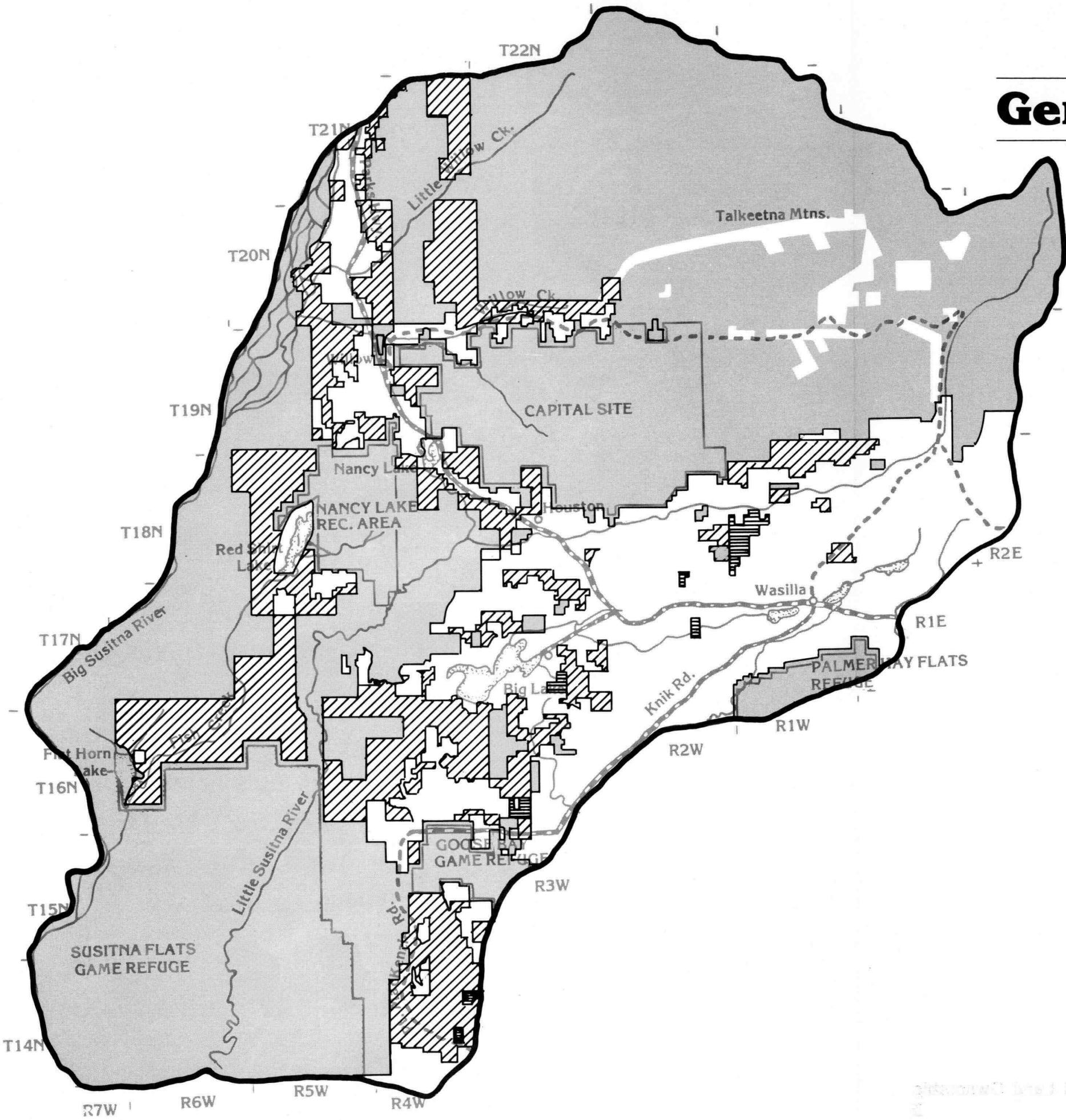
THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS DOCUMENT





This plan designates the uses that are to occur on much of the public land within the Willow Sub-basin; it shows areas to be sold for private use and areas to be retained in public ownership. (The plan does not control uses on private land.) Since more than one use is permitted on most public lands, the plan also establishes rules which allow various uses to occur without serious conflicts. For example, in an area intended for agricultural use, the plan explains how public access to streams and trails is to be maintained and how important wetlands are to be protected from pollution.

MAP 1
 Location of the
WILLOW
SUBBASIN
 scale: 1: 1,000,000



Generalized Land Ownership



-  **State — 619,740 ac. (65%)**
 - within legislative designated areas - 232,890 ac.
 - other state land - 386,850 ac.
-  **University - 6,270 ac. (1%)**
-  **Private/Federal - 193,730 ac. (20%)**
(includes approximately 13,300 acres of land held by native regional and village corporations)
-  **Borough - 135,830 ac. (14%)**

Total land in the Willow Subbasin — 970,000 acres
(includes lakes and land in miscellaneous ownership categories)



scale: 1: 332,000
June 1, 1982

To present this information, the plan is organized into four chapters. Chapter I is the Introduction. Besides this brief overview, the Introduction explains why a land use plan is necessary for public lands in the Willow Sub-basin, and why this is a joint borough and state plan. The Introduction also contains a review of the planning process that has led to this document and a preview of how the plan will be implemented.

Chapter II presents land use designations on borough and state lands in the Willow Sub-basin. The chapter also discusses the practical effect of these land use designations and explains their relationship to the Department of Natural Resources' State-wide Planning Program. Through the State-wide Plan the Department has developed goals and land use designations on a general scale for all state-owned lands.

Chapter III contains goals, policies, and management guidelines for each of the major resources or land use categories for which public lands will be managed or sold; e.g., forestry, agriculture, mining, settlement, etc. (Resource summaries for each of these categories are presented in Appendix 2.) Chapter III also contains policies and management guidelines for the following environmental conditions and land uses: wetlands, river and stream corridors, trails, and public access. The policies and management guidelines presented in Chapter III will control the day-to-day land management decisions affecting public lands in the sub-basin.

Chapter IV applies the land use designations presented in Chapter II and the policies and management guidelines presented in Chapter III to each of 25 "management units" in the Willow Sub-basin. (A management unit is an area that is generally homogeneous with respect to resources, topography, and land ownership.) For most of the management units, the following are presented: a statement of management intent, a list of designated land uses, and a set of management guidelines. The designated land uses are shown at the detailed scale of 1 inch to 1 mile. Units with very little public land are addressed by a statement of management intent and a set of recommended land uses.

Chapter IV is followed by four appendices. Appendix 1 presents recommendations from the report "Scenic Resources Along the Parks Highway" (Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1980). These recommendations are designed to protect the views seen from the highway. Management of public lands along the highway will be consistent with the recommendations presented in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 presents basic information about the land and resources in the sub-basin. Lands with high value for agricultural development, settlement, recreation, mining, and other important resources are mapped and described. The land use designations established in this plan are based, to a great extent, on the information presented in Appendix 2. Appendix 3 presents formal state land classifications which implement the land uses designated in this plan. These land classifications comprise the official record of the primary uses for which state land will be managed. Appendix 4 presents procedures for making modifications of and exceptions to the plan as it affects state lands.

WHY PLAN FOR THE USE OF PUBLIC LAND?

Through the management of public lands, the state and borough greatly influence the physical development patterns and the general quality of life in the Susitna Basin. Major development projects such as mining, timber harvests, or agriculture influence local job opportunities. Land retained for public hunting and fishing and land made available for housing clearly affect the character of community life. Because the use of public land so powerfully affects both the physical landscape and the quality of life, it is essential that there be an open public process of deciding how to manage that land.

Providing an open, public process for making land use decisions is a primary objective of the Willow Sub-basin land use planning program. The plan is a means of openly reviewing available resource information and public concerns prior to making long-range decisions about land management. It is also a means of considering and resolving conflicting land use objectives and making clear to the public what decisions have been made and why they have been made.

In addition to major land use decisions such as agricultural development projects or mineral leases, land managers face many day-to-day decisions about land use, such as whether to issue permits to build roads, cut timber, or extract sand and gravel. People who make both the major development project decisions and the day-to-day decisions need clear and consistent guidelines. Therefore, it is essential for land managers to have a written document which establishes long-range commitments for the use of public land and which provides clear policies for the management of those lands.

This document, or land use plan, is also valuable for private land-owners. If the state and borough are publicly committed to a land use pattern and land management policies, private investors can feel more secure in making decisions about their own land. For example, if someone is contemplating developing a subdivision adjacent to state land, it is important to know whether that state land is apt to become a gravel pit or a recreation area.

THE PURPOSE OF A JOINT BOROUGH-STATE PLAN

A land use pattern which meets both local and statewide objectives is fundamentally dependent on cooperative borough and state planning. Many of the important resource lands in the sub-basin are in mixed borough-state ownership. These lands can be developed most productively through projects which entail joint land use commitments, joint planning for roads and other infrastructure, coordinated disposals/lease schedules, and the like. For example, a major agricultural development project proposed by this plan is entirely dependent on these joint commitments.

Many of the benefits of joint planning are as obvious as they are critical to rational land management. For example, this document proposes parts of the Little Susitna River as a wilderness/recreation corridor. It would make little sense for the borough to pursue that intent by restricting use on one side of the river if the state were selling land for houses on the opposite bank. In another area where the state allocates land for grazing, the feasible farm headquarter sites for the grazing land are on borough land - this plan accordingly designates the borough land for farm use. In short, because what the state does with its lands affects the borough and vice versa, cooperative planning is essential.

Land disposals in particular require borough and state cooperation. If state land disposals are based on demand, as now mandated by the state legislature, the borough and state should agree what the demand is and which public lands - borough or state - best meet that demand. Not only the amount of land sold, but also its location require cooperative planning. The pattern of land disposals dramatically affects service costs, community character, feasibility of providing access, and the ability to manage adjacent lands for other purposes, such as mining or forestry. These are important matters that should be dealt with coherently and consistently by major public land owners. In light of these considerations, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game are jointly planning for the use of public lands in the Willow Sub-basin.

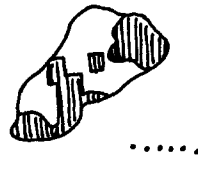
THE PLANNING PROCESS

The diagram on the following page illustrates the planning process that led to the Willow Sub-basin Plan. In 1977 the United States Department of Agriculture and the Alaska Department of Natural Resources began the Susitna River Basin Study, a cooperative data inventory effort which produced much of the resource information used to develop this plan. Data about soils, vegetation, hydrology, geologic hazards, recreation potential, and other resources were compiled and analyzed. (Most of this information is available in a report on the Willow Sub-basin published by the Soil Conservation Service in Anchorage). In late summer 1980, an interagency planning team was formed to develop a plan for state lands in the sub-basin. Team members included representatives from the various divisions within the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Fish and Game, the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, and the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Because of the necessity for cooperative planning discussed above, the planning team studied both borough and state lands. As indicated in the diagram, the planning team prepared maps showing resource values, held public workshops to discuss resources and appropriate land uses - then prepared a draft plan. The final plan was prepared after intensive public and agency review of the draft.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

AN INTERAGENCY PLANNING TEAM IS FORMED. STATE AND BOROUGH TEAM MEMBERS REPRESENT EACH OF THE IMPORTANT RESOURCES IN THE AREA: FORESTRY, AGRICULTURE, MINERALS AND ENERGY, SETTLEMENT, RECREATION, AND FISH AND WILDLIFE.

THE TEAM IDENTIFIES OBJECTIVES AND MAPS THE LAND NECESSARY TO MEET THESE OBJECTIVES FOR EACH RESOURCE.



RESOURCE MAPS ARE COMPARED TO IDENTIFY COMPATIBLE USES AND CONFLICTS. AFTER PUBLIC MEETINGS THE PLANNING TEAM PREPARES A DRAFT PLAN FOR PUBLIC AND AGENCY REVIEW.

AFTER PUBLIC HEARINGS AND NECESSARY MODIFICATIONS, THE COMMISSIONER OF THE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND THE BOROUGH ASSEMBLY APPROVE THE FINAL PLAN WHICH GUIDES PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT DECISIONS IN THE WILLOW SUB-BASIN.

The public participation program received special emphasis. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) began a public participation program for Willow Sub-basin Plan early in 1980. In April and May of that year DNR held meetings in Willow and Palmer (2 meetings in each place) to present results of the data inventory effort and to discuss appropriate uses of state lands. The completion date and intended products of the plan were announced at these meetings.

In the year following the meetings, members of the planning team met with many special interest groups to inform them of the plan's schedule and to provide them an opportunity to review resource data. (See the list of interest groups on page iii.) The Matanuska-Susitna Borough Trails Committee and other organizations made especially commendable efforts at mapping their recommendations.

In early spring 1981, the planning team circulated a questionnaire through three newspapers: the Frontiersman, the Anchorage Daily News, and the Anchorage Times. The questionnaire requested readers to rank the importance of various goals for the use of state land and asked them detailed questions about how specific resources should be managed. Over 400 people responded.

In April 1981, the planning team held four public workshops -two in Anchorage and two in Wasilla. Participants discussed goals for the use of state land, reviewed resource information, and mapped their recommendations for land uses. As expected, the maps recommended by people at the Anchorage workshops differed from those of the Wasilla workshop. The people in Anchorage were most concerned with using the recreation resources of the basin both for personal enjoyment and to stimulate the economy. The people at the Wasilla workshop were more interested in economic development - especially through agriculture and forestry.

After studying the questionnaire results and the maps from the public workshops and reviewing available resource information, the planning team prepared a draft plan which presented a set of recommended land uses, land management policies, and guidelines. The draft plan was a compromise among competing interests. However, it included much of what each of the two public workshop groups wanted. As will be clear to those who attended the workshops and the numerous public meetings, the public has had a major hand in developing this plan.

CHANGES IN THE DRAFT PLAN

The draft plan was circulated for public review in October 1981. The borough and state held public hearings in November, 1982 in Palmer and Anchorage, and again in February 1982 in Palmer. As a result of public and agency comment there were a number of changes in the draft plan. The major changes are highlighted below:

1. Additional Land for Agriculture

Approximately 3,500 additional acres of borough land between the Nancy Lakes State Recreation Area and the Susitna River are now designated for agricultural use. This land was designated for forestry management by the draft plan.

2. Eminent Domain

The draft plan indicated that the state may purchase land adjacent to the Little Susitna River for public access to the river. The final plan specifies that the state will not use the power of eminent domain in such cases but will only purchase small parcels for river access from willing sellers.

3. Closure of Game Refuges to Coal Prospecting and Development

The draft states that the Susitna Game Flats, the Palmer Hay Flats, and the Goose Bay Game Refuges shall be closed to coal prospecting and development. This statement is eliminated in the final plan. The decision whether to close these areas to coal prospecting and development will not be made through this planning process.

4. Proposed Closure of Portions of Little Willow Creek Willow Creek, and the Little Susitna River to All Mining

The draft proposes that portions of the above streams be closed to all mining. In the final plan only the Little Susitna Corridor Management Unit is closed to all mineral leasing and to locatable mineral entry. Portions of the other streams (identified in the plan) are closed to coal prospecting and development.

5. Oil and Gas Exploration and Development

The draft does not clearly state that the entire sub-basin, except for portions of the Little Susitna River, is open to oil and gas exploration and potential development. This point is stated clearly in the final plan.

6. Disposal of Land in the 100-Year Floodplain

The draft states that there will be no disposal of public land in the 100-year floodplain. The final plan allows disposals in the regulatory flood fringe - that portion of the 100-year floodplain where development can occur without significant

danger to life and property and without significantly increasing flood heights downstream.

7. Seasonal Grazing Limitations on State Land

The draft states that no stock may be released on state lands in the Willow Sub-basin before June 1. The final plan does not specify such a date. Seasonal limitations, when necessary, will be developed through range management plans for particular locations after more detailed study.

8. Instream Flows

The draft states that water appropriations may not reduce surface water resources below the amount required for maintenance of fish and wildlife resources. This policy cannot be implemented because necessary data are not available. The final plan identifies streams which the Department of Fish and Game and the Division of Parks recommend for instream flow studies.

9. Procedures for Modifications of and Exceptions to the Plan

The final plan explains procedures for changing the plan and for making minor exceptions to its provisions as it affects state land. Similar procedures for modifying the plan as it affects borough lands will be set forth in the borough's comprehensive plan.

IMPLEMENTATION

After the plan is signed by the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources it is state policy for the management of state lands in the Willow Sub-basin. All decisions (land disposals, classifications, timber sales, road building, mineral leasing and all other actions on state lands) shall comply with the provisions of this plan. The plan's effect on state land may be changed by amendment or by specific direction from the Alaska Legislature. After the plan is approved by the borough it controls land use decisions on borough lands, and all decisions (land disposals, timber sales, road building, mineral leasing, and all other actions on borough lands) shall comply with the provisions of this plan. The plan's effect on borough lands may be changed by amendment approved by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly.

The land use designations made in this plan will be officially established in state records through the state's land classification system. The system is a formal record of the primary uses for which each parcel of state land will be managed. (Classifications are presented in Appendix 3.) These classifications will be shown on land status plats

which can be viewed at various offices of the Department of Natural Resources. These plats will indicate the primary uses designated by this plan and will refer the reader to the plan for more detailed information, including secondary land uses and land management guidelines.

Another important step in DNR's implementation of this plan will be more detailed planning for specific management units in the study area. These detailed plans are referred to as "management plans" as distinguished from this document which is an "area plan." An area plan sets forth permitted land uses, related policies and management guidelines for a particular study area but does not include the detailed planning necessary for implementation. For example, an area plan does not design land disposals or pinpoint the location of roads or utility lines; it does not establish the schedule for timber sales and agricultural development projects. These design and scheduling decisions on state land are addressed by management plans which implement the provisions of an area plan on a site specific basis. In Chapter II there is a discussion of specific management plans necessary for implementation of the Willow Sub-basin Plan.

MODIFICATION OF THE PLAN

A plan can never be so far-seeing as to provide solutions to all land use problems, nor can it be inflexible. Therefore, the land use designations, the policies, and the management guidelines of this plan may be changed if conditions warrant. The plan will be periodically updated as new data become available and as changing social and economic conditions place different demands on public lands. An interagency planning team will coordinate periodic review of this plan when the Alaska Department of Natural Resources and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough consider it necessary. The plan review will include meetings with all interested groups and the general public.

In addition to periodic review, modification of the plan or exceptions to its provisions may be proposed at any time by members of the public or government agencies. Appendix 4 presents procedures for amendments to and minor modifications of the plan which will be followed by the Department of Natural Resources with regard to state-owned land within the Willow Sub-basin. Procedures for amendments to and minor modifications of the plan which will be followed by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough with regard to borough-owned lands in the Willow Sub-basin will be set forth in the borough's comprehensive plan. Appendix 4 also presents procedures for making special exceptions to the provisions of the plan when modifications are not necessary or appropriate.